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U.S. Agreement Near on Supplying Stingers to Saudis

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President Reagan and senior administration officials moved closer to agreeing on an emergency supply of 200 Stinger antiaircraft missiles for Saudi Arabia yesterday, but are divided about a subsequent sale and determined to say as little as possible about the future U.S. course in the embattled Persian Gulf, according to unusually tight-lipped officials.

Reagan and his key advisers met at the White House to discuss developments in the gulf, and Saudi Ambassador Bandar bin Sultan later had separate meetings with White House and Pentagon officials. Very little was disclosed about any of the meetings, and the silence produced a surge of speculation because an announcement of new weaponry for the Saudis had been expected.

Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger said on ABC-TV's "Good Morning America" that he agreed with the Saudis that the shoulder-held antiaircraft missile would be a "very necessary addition to their air defense capability right now."

Official sources reported a consensus within the administration on sending the Saudis 200 missiles next week through the exercise of presidential emergency powers.

Intelligence reports justifying the action say that Iran might mount suicide air attacks against Saudi oil fields or other installations as its war with Iraq spreads.

Weinberger said in the television interview that he perceives the Iranian threat to Saudi Arabia as "ex-

tremely serious in the sense that the Iranian government is run by people who are totally unpredictable."

A senior State Department official, while acknowledging that there have been "some indications that there may be some danger" to Saudi Arabia from Iranian suicide attacks, said, "I'm not suggesting to you we have information they were about to do this."

A complicating factor is that Israel has told the administration in a private meeting at the State Department and a public statement in Jerusalem that it opposes supplying the sophisticated antiaircraft weapons to Saudi Arabia. It is not clear, however, how energetically Israel would fight such an administration move.

According to official sources, a debate is taking place on whether the administration should seek to sell the Saudis 1,000 additional Stingers, settle for a lesser number in hopes of easing the concerns of Israel's supporters in Congress or defer a decision on the second part of the plan until events in the gulf region make clear whether the Saudis will need more than the initial 200 missiles.

In addition, the sources said, some of Reagan's congressional backers have suggested that the deal might be more palatable to Congress if the Stingers were to be leased to the Saudis rather than sold outright. The administration is understood to believe that such an arrangement is not legally feasible, but the sources said it has agreed to explore the possibility.

The administration decision to say as little as possible about the Persian Gulf problem extended to discussion of the oil-supply situation in that vital waterway.

White House spokesman Larry Speakes, confronted by Iraq's claim to have destroyed several more ships yesterday, refused to say whether the administration still considers the gulf open to international shipping and, if not, how Reagan intends to carry out his pledge to ensure free navigation there.

Speakes, responding to questions about Reagan's pledge "to do what is necessary" to keep open the Strait of Hormuz, said, "We're doing what we can and what we feel is necessary." But when questions continued about whether the gulf is open, Speakes replied:

"That is a simplistic question dealing with a very complex subject, and I don't think it is fair on your part to try to pin a government spokesman down to a question like that."

His answer underscored the dilemma facing the administration, which is increasingly concerned about the war disrupting the shipment of oil through the gulf but which also is reluctant to commit U.S. forces to military action in the region.

At his news conference Tuesday night, Reagan reiterated that the United States and its allies "would not stand by and see the straits of the Persian Gulf closed to international traffic." But the president also said he did not expect that American air and naval forces would have to become involved.

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Michael H. Armacost, undersecretary of state for political affairs, conferred with Israeli Ambassador Meir Rosenne late Thursday to inform him of the impending sale of Stingers to Saudi Arabia.

Israeli officials said Rosenne promised to relay the U.S. views to his government but also told Armacost that Israel opposes, as a matter of principle, the sale of sophisticated weaponry to any country that considers itself at war with the Jewish state.